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Iceberg Alley

Ronald F. Reynolds

Newfoundland's northern coast is one of the best places in the world to see icebergs. Every spring hundreds of them drift along the shore of "Iceberg Alley." Icebergs are spectacular, especially when it is sunny. If the sunlight is strong they look like sparkling jewels floating in dark blue water (Image 1). The product of glaciers, the ice in icebergs is formed under tremendous pressure from extremely thick layers of snow that metamorphose into *névé*, then *firn*, and eventually glacial ice. Icebergs refract light differently but usually have a characteristic "blueness" (Images 2 and 3). Ice formed this way has a greater specific gravity and consequently floats lower in water. What is seen above water is only one-tenth of an iceberg's actual height. It is very impressive to approach a monolith that stands four or five stories above the surface and consider how much more is hidden beneath the water.

Icebergs are often classified by the shapes they take: tabular (steep sides with a flat top); domed (sort of rounded); blocky (flat top with steep vertical sides); wedge (top narrowed to a pyramid-like point); dry dock (eroded to form a U-shaped enclosure); and pinnacle (one or more spires). Frequently, they are hybrids and in some cases may take on shapes resembling great creatures, such as the giant polar bear swimming in Image 4.

Icebergs "calve" from the Greenland icecap and follow the current through the Davis Strait between Greenland and Labrador. They usually get trapped in pack ice (Image 5) drift back and forth, alternating north-south for several years before eventually working their way along the northern coast of the province. Most of the time they melt before entering busy North Atlantic shipping lanes (but as the 1912 *Titanic*

accident proved, that is not always true). In years past, increasing numbers of iceberg sightings led some to attribute the phenomenon to global warming. Greenland is the largest island in the world and it is almost completely covered with a very thick layer of ice. It is estimated that if the entire sheet were to melt it would raise sea level in excess of 15 feet! Although there is little doubt that the Greenland Icecap is rapidly shrinking, it is not unusual to have large variations from year to year.

The best time for viewing icebergs is late spring after the pack ice breaks up. St Anthony, a town on Newfoundland's northern peninsula, and Twillingate, a town in the north-central area, are prime locations for viewing (Image 6). In each community there are licensed tour boat operators who provide safe, informative and enjoyable iceberg cruises (Images 4 and 7). Image 8

shows a huge iceberg that stood perhaps four stories high, as seen from a tour boat. Many, even large ones, may be seen from land (Image 9). Today, it is easy to decide where to go for viewing because websites such as <http://www.icebergfinder.com/> keep track of recent iceberg sightings. Since icebergs melt and move quickly these online reports are sometimes outdated, but many local residents are extremely helpful and graciously provide current information on sightings.

Along the northern coast, a local Newfoundland industry has developed selling beer, vodka and bottled water made from ice recovered from icebergs: "10,000 year-old water: extra pure!" is the claim. Since moving glaciers grind rock and carry all kinds of dirt and other debris, one might question that statement. Since some of the ice might easily be 200,000 years old, however, it is unlikely to contain man-made pollutants such as DDT. But icebergs are dangerous in other ways: they are potentially unstable and may suddenly shift or roll over as the currents drag them along the sea floor. Because of this, locals usually gather the ice by using rifles to shoot off chunks, which they then pick up with a net mounted on a pole.

These monoliths of the north are a gorgeous sight to behold. It is easy to see them, and when you combine that with the solitude of the place and the hospitality that Newfoundlanders provide, it makes for a wonderful visit.



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Image 1



Image 2



Image 3



Image 4



Image 5



Image 6



Image 7



Image 8



Image 9